



JU(RI)STES EN SANTÉ

HEALTHY LEGAL MINDS

REPORT:

McGill University Faculty of Law
Student Psychological Study

May 2017



METHODOLOGY

Healthy Legal Minds collected and analyzed data with the aim of guiding the implementation of a new mental health initiatives at McGill Law. The consultant team was composed of two graduate students in Industrial and Organizational (I/O) psychology, Sarah Bourdeau and Caroline Leduc, who lead the project, as well as Julie Ménard (Ph.D), I/O psychologist, who supervised the project.

A bilingual (i.e., French and English) survey was co-created by the Institut de recherche en santé psychologique des travailleurs (IRSPT) and Healthy Legal Minds to identify factors that may contribute to health issues in the faculty. The online survey was completed by 362 McGill Law students between January and March 2017. The aggregated survey data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (v.20). Open-ended questions were also included (answered by 76% of respondents), and a non-systematic thematic analysis was conducted to extract relevant information to factors that may contribute to health issues, and recommendations as of ways to promote mental health at McGill Law¹. This report presents the main conclusions and recommendations drawn from the results of the survey.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

According to the collected data, 2 out of 3 McGill Law students experience psychological health challenges, and they do so more often than before entering the program. Half identify their experience at McGill Law as having a negative impact on their well-being.

In their response to open-ended questions, most report that the workload and schedule constraints make it hard for them to practice self-care or to seek help from a professional.

The data leads to conclude that four main factors may explain why law school students tend to experience challenges in regards with psychological health, namely, (1) performance culture, (2) uneven heavy workload and lack of clarity regarding expectations, (3) discrimination and bullying and (4) restricted access to mental health services.

1. Performance culture

- ***Student body and competitive environment:*** The student body is composed of high-achievers that are used to being the best, creating a lot of competition between students. This competitive environment is magnified by the structure of the program, the culture of performance, and the fact that there are more students than jobs available. Furthermore, by the nature of the admission requirements, the student body is mainly composed of students with unrelenting standards, which helped them achieve the level of performance needed to get into McGill Law. Such standards, which are

¹ Answers to open-ended questions (qualitative data) were separated from the quantitative data, in order to make it impossible to associate the comments to quantitative responses that would help to identify an author.



reinforced by the culture of performance in the Faculty, push students to pressure themselves to do it all (e.g., attend classes, perfectly do all the assignments, participate in extra-curricular activities, participate in social/networking events, etc.). Students feel that in order to be successful, they have to do it all, and to aim for a specific career path. These high expectancies are hard to achieve, especially while failing to maintain self-care practices, which could be fostering high feelings of low self-worth for students.

- **Grading system:** The forced normally distributed grading system fosters competition between already competitive students. It could also prevent McGill students to remain competitive with other students in the field (e.g., for internships, for graduate school requirements, etc.), which can have deleterious effect on their well-being (i.e. feeling of low self-worth and discouragement that their hard work is not reflected by the grade they get). This grading system may also foster a feeling of unfairness. Student perceive that their grades are given somehow arbitrarily and without real fundament on established criteria.

2. Uneven heavy workload and lack of clarity regarding expectations

- An intense workload and a high pressure to perform are put on students, in order to prepare them for the realities of a career in law. Some students report (in response to open-ended question) that they don't have the basic knowledge and skills to deal with such demands, impairing both their learning experience and well-being.
- **Scheduling:** Unstable and binding class schedule, last minute reading assignments and intensive exam scheduling makes it hard for students to manage the workload, team work, and other activities, as well as taking care of themselves, which both may lead to student's poor well-being. Furthermore, the inflexibility of the program (i.e., impossibility to study part-time, and the necessity to be at school 5 days a week), and the near impossibility to study part-time or to have a day off makes it hard for students that need to work outside of school to sustain themselves.
- **Evaluation and pedagogy:** Students report a lack of clarity on the evaluation criteria and professors' expectations. Students don't receive feedback on their work, making it hard for them to improve, and fostering the belief that grading is given arbitrarily.

3. Discrimination and bullying

- **Social environment at McGill Law:** Some students report that the social environment at McGill Law is positive, but a majority of students reported events of discrimination and bullying in regards to diverging opinions on controversial matters. These events occurred mainly online (i.e., Facebook groups), but also on campus (e.g., in class, in the hallways). Specifically, students sharing opinions diverging from the general consensus on acceptable viewpoints, were intimidated and socially rejected from the group.



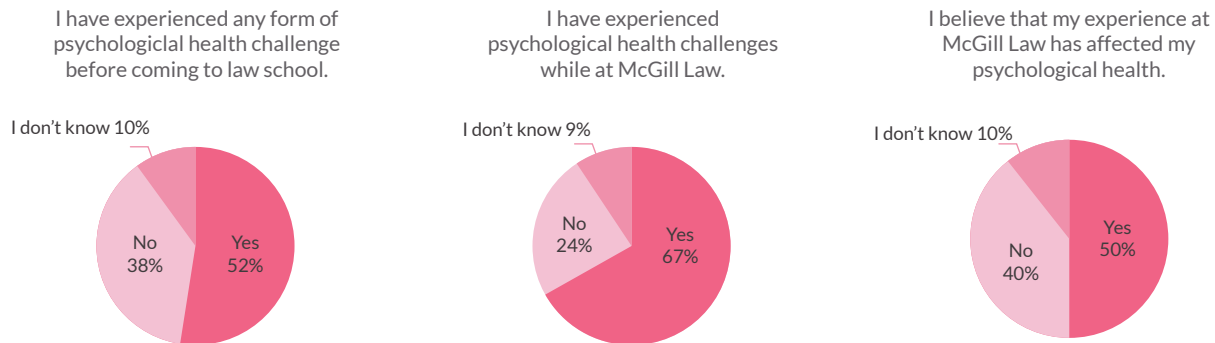
4. Access to mental health services and other services:

- Many students are confused about the services that are available to them. Furthermore, students noted that wait time are too long at McGill Mental Health Services (3-6 months), and students express the need to have access to resources while they are experiencing difficult times.
- Many students feel that the rigid bureaucracy of the Student Affairs Office (SAO) makes it difficult to obtain the accommodations they would need in time of crisis and/or to prevent their mental health from deteriorating to the point of burnout, per example.

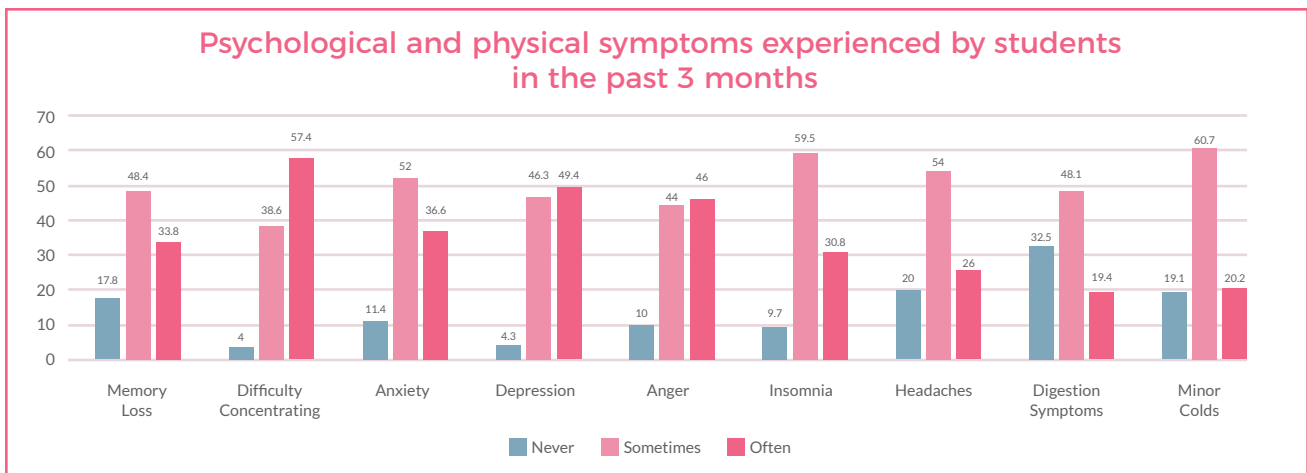
RESULTS

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

A majority (66.7%) of students experienced psychological health challenges while studying at McGill law, a proportion significantly higher than prior entering the program². Almost half of the surveyed students believe that their experience in the faculty plays a negative role in their psychological health (49.7%), and that the demands of their academic life are not manageable (52.2%). Almost 20% of the respondents admitted they have had thoughts of possibly ending their life at least once in a while in the past 3 months (49 students = Once in a while; 15 students = Fairly/very often).



A large majority of students experienced psychological and physical symptoms sometimes or often in the past 3 months, The vast majority (i.e., 97.3%) report being at least somewhat resilient.

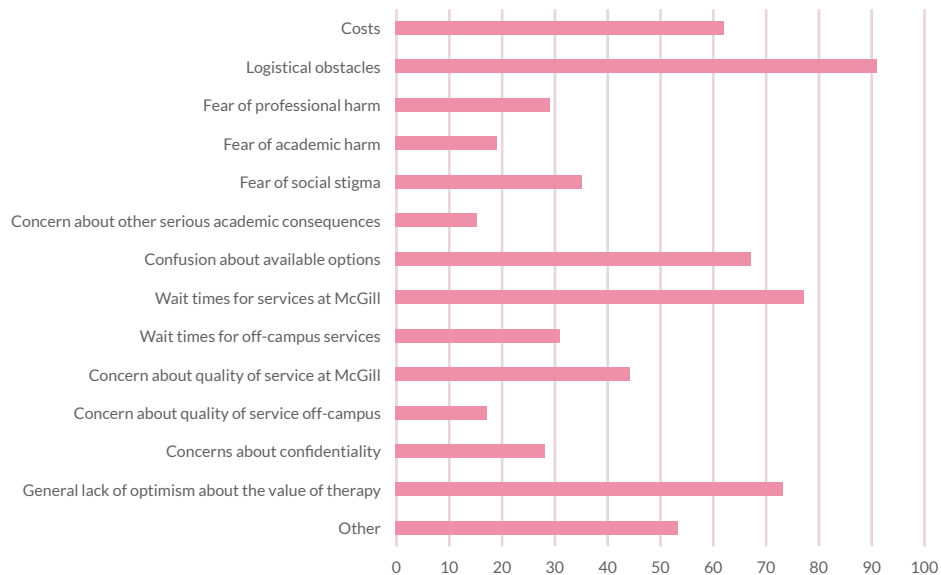


² Chi-square test: $\chi^2 (df = 1, N = 351) = 44.38, p = .00$

ACCESS TO AND USE OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Two out of 3 students considered seeking psychological health services (including any service or treatment provided by a mental health professional either on or off campus [e.g., a medical doctor, psychologist, counselor, or social worker]), and about 1 student out of 3 did use psychological health services.

Reasons given by surveyed students for not seeking treatment while at law school:



A majority of students (73.3%) feel that they are entitled to receive services for their mental health, and 46.2% of students prefer not to use the resources at McGill because they believe that others need it more than they do (36.7% disagree and 17.1% neither agree nor disagree).

Students decide not to seek psychological health services mainly because of logistical constraints, wait-times for services at McGill (McGill Mental Health and Counseling Service), general lack of optimism about the value of therapy, confusion about available options (especially during the first year) and costs.

Furthermore, many students report in their response to open-ended questions that they did not have enough time to seek psychological health services or to commit to therapy.



TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AT MCGILL LAW

Students at McGill Law generally agree with the fact that to address the trend of poor psychological health in law school, it is important for students to talk about psychological challenges they are experiencing.

Although,

- 78% of students believe it is important to talk openly about mental health challenges they experience and 61.6% believe their colleagues agree;
- 48.8% of students believe that their colleagues do talk about psychological challenges they are experiencing, but in a superficial matter, with no action toward improving the collective health at McGill law;
- 52.8% of students don't think their colleagues expect them to talk about mental psychological health challenges, and 45.7% don't talk openly about the psychological challenges they are experiencing (43.6% do, and 10.7% neither agreed nor disagreed).
- More than half of the surveyed students feel reluctant to share mental health issues because their colleagues will be a part of their future professional network (55.8%) and because they fear that they might get categorized as not strong enough for the legal profession.

DIVERSITY, OPINIONS AND DISCRIMINATION AT MCGILL LAW

More than half of surveyed students agree that people are treated equitably, are not singled out, receive equal opportunities, are equally tolerant of others and generally receive equal treatment from the administration, from the professors and from their peers (53% agree, 21.8% disagree and 24.7% neither agree nor disagree) regardless of their ability / economic / ethnic / gender / identity / sexual orientation group.

According to responses to open-ended questions, some students seem to be disadvantaged by their socio-economic background. For example, students for whom English is not their first language will probably have to work harder than students for whom it is in order to fully understand their reading material. Students that need to work outside of school in order to support themselves, and which don't have access to part-time studies, are also penalized in the sense that they have less time to devote to their studies, and may not have the funding to attend some of the social events or networking opportunities which are important to develop their professional network. Finally, the physical space may not make it possible for some disabled students to move around and attend certain events.



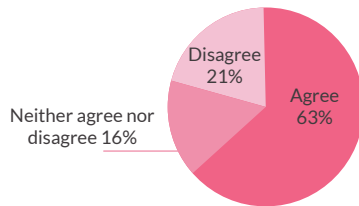
Many respondents report that students who don't hold the same opinion as the majority are discriminated, or even intimidated by other students. It occurs both on and off campus, as well as online.

- 46.4% of students find it difficult to voice their opinions on controversial matters (40.8% disagree and 12.8 neither agree nor disagree);
- 60.7% of students don't feel free to express their true opinion in online discussion (21.6% disagree and 18.6 neither agree nor disagree);
- 37.5% of students indicate that controversial discussions on McGill Law Facebook Groups have a negative impact on their well-being (35.1% disagree, 27.5% neither agree nor disagree).

PRESSURE TO PERFORM WELL

Students feel a high pressure to perform well, and many accept that they have to pay a personal cost to do so:

I understand that I may feel isolated, or even depressed in order to graduate/succeed in law school.



More than half (57.5%) of students admit that, when they compare themselves to their peers, they don't feel like they have what it takes to be in law school, and are afraid that it might eventually show that they are less intelligent than others believe.

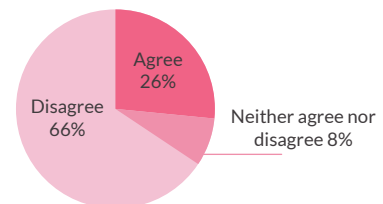
Almost half of surveyed students (45.3%), don't agree with the affirmation "Since I began law school, my perception of what it means to work in the legal profession improved". 34.5% agree and 20.1 neither agree nor disagree.

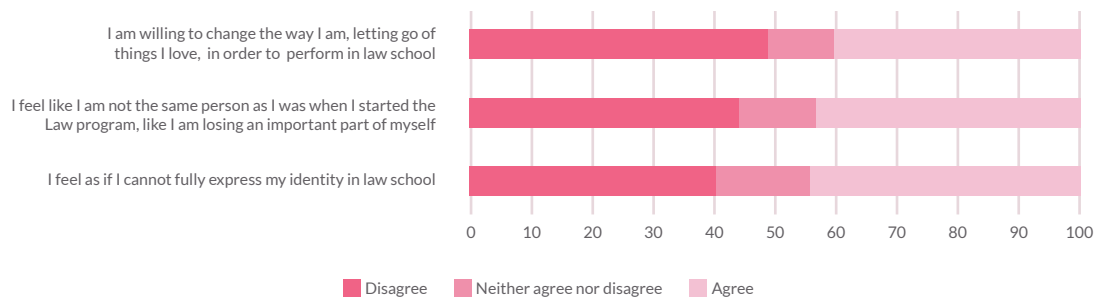
88.4% of students believe it is important to perform well, both academically and extra-curricularly, and 93.6% believe it is important to do so at McGill Law.

86.9% of students believe their colleagues perform well both academically and extra-curricularly, 67.8% believe they personally perform well academically and 71.5% believe they personally perform well extra-curricularly.

A majority (63%) of students admit they are never really happy with the work they do, even when they do their best, which could be linked to the mandatory B average and the forced grading curve.

I find that the expectations and constraints imposed by the Faculty on my personal time (classes, schedule, workload, reacting to emails, makeup classes at irregular timeslots, info sessions on studies or career, etc.) are reasonable and manageable without having to neglect my personal needs and health.





SUBSTANCE USE³

A majority (67.1%) of students consume alcohol between one and five times per week.

Almost half of students use alcohol to ease the stress or to get away from negative emotions. For 22% of students, the consumption of alcohol stopped them from doing what they had to do for school.

Around a quarter of students admitted using marijuana (28.1%) and tobacco (22%) to ease the stress or to get away from negative emotions.

The grand majority of students report they have never used other drugs (i.e., focus drugs: 91.7%; marijuana: 51%; MDMA: 86.6%; Cocaine: 90.8%; Tobacco: 63.7% and other non-prescribed drugs: 95%).

RECOMMENDATIONS

A cultural change within an organization needs to start with the willingness of those in authority who have the power to make durable and significant changes in order to have long-lasting effect.

1. **Teaching students how to cope with the performance culture and developing their skills that will help them cope in their future career:**
 - a. The current educational model is structured so that students have rigid and heavier academic workload in 1L, which then gradually reduces. Reduce the workload of students in the first year of the program, and slowly increase it as students develop their knowledge and skills.
 - b. Create a mandatory class for all first year students covering the following subjects:
 - i. Basic knowledge to understand readings assignments and skills to succeed in law school (e.g., provide a list of all technical Law terms/definitions; effective reading workshop);
 - ii. Various possible career paths with a law degree and resources accessible within the Faculty to help students in their career paths;



- iii. Mental health prevention (e.g., psychoeducation on burn-out, anxiety and depression; stress management techniques; healthy work habits, i.e. time management workshop). N.B. The implementation of this class would benefit only future students of McGill Laws but not the actual L1-L4 and grad students. Special considerations should be taken in order to get high attendance (e.g., reduced workload for actual students, mandatory workshops, etc.).

2. Raising awareness in the Faculty, schedule, administrative constraints, and pedagogy:

A first step would be to raise awareness in the Faculty on how schedule and administrative constraints can hinder student's well-being. A series of administrative changes could then be used to significantly help students maintain higher levels of well-being, and gain more knowledge and skills from their experience at McGill Law.

- a. Optimization of the schedule system to make it more flexible for students to manage the demands of law school (e.g., having fixed blocks of times for classes; forbid last-minute schedule changes, etc.); implementation of the possibility for students to study part-time.
- b. Raise awareness among professors at McGill Law on the importance of having clear evaluation criteria and expectations (e.g., reading assignments specified in advance) for each class at the first class of the semester in the Syllabus; as well as on offering more feedback on students' work throughout the semester and diminishing the % of the final exam (e.g., multiples graded assignments during the semester). Consider the establishment of a Faculty policy.
- c. Removing the imposed B average and forced grading curve.
- d. Establishment of a one-week break during the Fall semester and between the Winter and Summer semesters could also be considered.

3. Mental health services:

- a. Establishment of on-campus drop-in hours (e.g., a space where students could drop-in to talk with someone right away when they are experiencing psychological health challenges);
- b. Implementation of a better access to on-campus mental health services to students (e.g., establishment of a clinic for McGill Law students);
- c. Implementation of a better communication medium for students to access all accessible services (e.g., Mental health services on and off campus; Student Affairs Office; Career Development Office; Insurance coverage, etc.) by having all of the information in one place, and reducing information surcharge.



4. Other possible initiatives:

- a. Implementation of a mentoring program, in which older students could mentor younger students as they begin their studies (e.g., how to deal with the workload, what to focus on each year, etc.).
- b. Implementation of social events that does not involve grades/extra-curricular activities/career, and reduction of firms event; organize meet and talk on specific themes.
- c. Establishment of a Faculty policy about cyberbullying (e.g. acknowledging it, stating it will be taken seriously and that the Faculty might act on it if needed).
- d. Facilitate the process to obtain the accommodations that the students are seeking when reaching out to the Student Affairs Office (SAO) and foster the staff's awareness and empathy about student's difficulties (i.e. mental health) and needs.
- e. Provide training to all Faculty members (administrative staffs and professors) about the warning signs that someone will have or is currently having a mental breakdown.

TABLE OF APPENDICES

	Survey	APPENDIX 1
Written submissions in response to open-ended questions		APPENDIX 2
Substance use detailed results		APPENDIX 3